

## Transnational Education: Multi-phase Experiences as Determinants of Graduates' Satisfaction

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**Abstract.** The rise of transnational education involving the co-working of partner educational institutions across national boundaries offers opportunities for educational institutions to expand operations globally. The success of such partnerships in delivering successful outcomes is critical to business performance. In this, students' perceptions and impressions of the educational experience during their period of study are thought to be central to the success criteria of transnational education. This paper extends that accepted understanding to examine the satisfaction levels and quality judgments of students who have undertaken transnational business programs post their period of study. Findings from a focus group of recent transnational graduates are presented showing their views on satisfaction over differing phases of the cycle of their student experience. Factors as predictors of satisfaction emerged and are used to develop a holistic model of student satisfaction. The paper concludes by identifying areas for future research.

**Keywords:** Transnational Education, Offshore Business Programs, Student Satisfaction and Quality Education

### 1. Introduction

The provision of transnational education by Australian universities, particularly in Asian countries, has steadily grown in the last decade (see, for example Hussin, 2007). Transnational education -generally understood as education which is provided by an origin institution from one country to students domiciled in another country through a partnership with an institution in the host country- offer potential benefits, both financial and educational, to stakeholders in both the origin and host countries. For the origin institution it provides an opportunity for expansion of business beyond the confines of the local market. For the host institution, it offers an opportunity to raise their profile and business activity by aligning themselves with the reputation of prestigious international education providers. For students, it offers an opportunity to study with a well-regarded overseas institution without leaving their home country. Thus, to maximise these opportunities, it is essential to understand some of the key factors affecting both the satisfaction and quality judgements of the students.

It is suggested in much of the literature that students appear to have more concerns with 'satisfaction' than 'quality' when evaluating a degree delivered 'offshore' (see, for example Davis *et al.*, 2000; Gibson, 2010). Accordingly, there is a growing research interest in students' perceptions and experiences of the transnational delivery occurrence. On the issue of students' perceptions and experiences, graduates in particular, can be considered 'experts' in providing an insight and real knowledge - with their own voices - of those factors which underline 'satisfaction'. This paper seeks to identify those factors which determine 'satisfaction' through interpretative narratives of transnational graduates' experiences and perspectives. The paper commences with an outline of the concepts of both transnational education and satisfaction. An outline of the context of the research and approach follows. Summary findings from focus groups conducted in Hong Kong are presented and discussed, and a model of transnational student satisfaction factors is

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presented. The paper concludes with implications for practice and recommendations for areas of future research.

## **2. Concepts Defined**

### **2.1. Transnational Education**

Transnational education refers to the provision of education programs by an educational institution, to students physically situated in an offshore location (Seah and Edwards, 2006). Thus, in Australia, the most common term to refer to transnational education is *offshore education* (Chapman and Pyvis, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Hussin, 2007; Leask, 2004). Typically, this is delivered in conjunction with a partner institution in the offshore location. The provision of tertiary education programs through partner institutions introduces the issues of ‘collaboration’ and ‘communication’, both factors considered fundamental to integrate a well-defined co-ordinated program approach. As the success of teaching and learning programs in a franchised (that is; partner/transnational delivery) setting, is dependent on the collaboration between partners, communication becomes critical to guarantee both a coordinated and integrated approach to the delivery, teaching and management of programs between the delivery partners.

Success in delivering transnational education can in turn, provide international exposure that has the potential to translate into success in the recruitment of international students to onshore study in the origin institution’s home country. This may occur through large numbers of students transferring to the local programs and/or enrolments in onshore postgraduate degrees. One might say that transnational education is potentially the seed attracting international students to enrol, study and live abroad. Consequently, it becomes critical to deliver educational programs that - in collaboration with the ‘partner’ institutions - are perceived to be of high quality and provide satisfaction to students.

### **2.2. Satisfaction**

There are a variety of stakeholders in transnational programs, including academic staff, administrative staff, students, students’ families, employers, the onshore university and offshore partner, government, etc. Each of these stakeholders has a relatively different view of the concept of ‘satisfaction’. The different demands and requirements of each stakeholder in themselves shape the various definitions of ‘satisfaction’ and ‘quality’ delivery of education. From the students’ perspectives, academic experiences are often perceived to be the most frequent factor influencing satisfaction. As a result, most research conducted in higher and transnational education appears to be around the evaluation of these academic experiences (Gibson, 2010). Academic experiences involve activities related to teaching, course assessments, class participation, class engagement, course material, form of delivery and so forth. These academic experiences are common to evaluating student’s satisfaction, yet they do not stand alone.

Gibson (2010) further argues that the factors associated with student’s overall satisfaction are to a certain degree linked to the student’s emotional behaviour towards assessments shaped by the cross-cultural teaching and learning approaches, the student’s engagement with both institutions (i.e. origin and host university), the student’s sense of belonging to the institution and the university’s responsiveness. Gibson highlights that these factors are often missed in the studies of business student’s satisfaction and as such, they need careful consideration. Thus, this suggests that there are several other areas of satisfaction that need further study. This research intends to explore these areas to identify predictors of offshore students’ overall satisfaction.

## **3. The Research Project**

The focus of this study is a transnational undergraduate business program taught by an Australian university with a local partner in Hong Kong. The university which is the subject of this research delivered its first transnational program approximately fifteen years ago, and successfully continues to deliver a range of programs in a number of locations outside Australia, including Hong Kong and Malaysia. The university undergraduate business program, central to this research, is offered onshore and offshore with similar content and assessment structures. Academic staff generally undertake induction programs provided by their faculty or the learning support units to prepare for intercultural communication and offshore conditions which may be different from those onshore. Offshore teaching, administrative and annual review visits are planned to fit in with onshore requirements and in line with requirements of offshore programs.

Often offshore students lack an initial understanding about the cultural educational setting and academic expectations from the international university (Greenholtz, 2000; Gu, 2009; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009). One of the main concerns for both academic staff and students is that opportunity for academic interactions are limited by distance and the time-frame of the course delivery. In the undergraduate program under study, students are generally fulltime working individuals and therefore choose to study at university part time. Classes are held in the evenings in two intensive blocks of one week each. Between each visit by an Australian-based lecturer, a local tutor undertakes a small number of tutorials with the students. This is supported by online learning sites and extensive study guides and structured readings and assignments.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. General Approach**

The research approach is conceptualised within the qualitative interpretative paradigm as it seeks an understanding of the complexities involved in the students' experiences and personal views. The research presented in this paper is the first phase of a larger study comprising two phases. This first phase, which has been completed, involved focus group interview with a total of nine graduates in Hong Kong. The second phase, involving a large scale survey is currently being undertaken - also in Hong Kong - and is the subject of a separate study. The profile characteristics of the members of the focus group are:

- Full time employed
- Recent graduates (within the last 12 months) of the Bachelor degree.
- Hong Kong residents

### **4.2. The design of interview discussions**

A framework was developed and used to guide the questions directed to the focus groups; to elicit views and insights as to the level of satisfaction pertaining to the phases of their encounter with the educational institution. Such phases are reflective of the students' cycle of encounter with the education institution; namely, the pre-enrolment phase, the academic phase, the connection phase and the post-degree phase.

Justification for this focus is based on the rationale that the students' experiences with the educational institution occur over the full cycle over which these phases occur. In the initial phase (Phase 1), potential students are drawn to explore various options open to them to undertake tertiary studies. Once an academic institution is chosen based on the perceived level of congruence between what is expected and what is offered, the students enter the next phase (Phase 2) where they experience the academic activities and setting of the chosen institution.

Subsequent and yet complementary to the academic experience phase, the connection phase (Phase 3) is when the students are fully enrolled, involved in their study and relating to other students and staff. The issue of satisfaction in this phase is thought to be associated with the relationship (positive or negative) that they might experience as they encounter the people as well as the various processes of the institution.

Finally in the post-degree phase (Phase 4) following graduation, the students enter the workforce as a graduate and alumni of the conferring institution. At this point the students' experience of satisfaction can either end or continue to varying degrees as a repeat of the cycle of phases identified.

### **4.3. Method of data gathering and analysis**

The responses were audio taped and later independently transcribed verbatim. It is to be noted that whilst the standard of English proficiencies of the focus group members varied, nonetheless, the meaning conveyed was not obscured by the deficiencies of the verbal expressions that were elicited. The data from the focus groups' narratives were qualitatively analysed according to Huberman and Matthew's (2002) emerging theme methodologies. The students' experiences over these four phases were then used to identify the predictors of satisfaction.

The following section presents the findings of the analysis with short examples of comments to support the explanation of the four phases.

## **5. Findings and Analysis**

### **5.1. Phase 1: pre-enrolment experiences**

This Phase links directly to the students' desire to gather information about offshore programs. Overall data indicate that students' initial interaction with transnational business programs demonstrates high motivation and willingness to engage. The desire to study evolves from a perceived need to have a tertiary qualification. These needs included a desire to maintain current employment arrangements and to allow them to remain competitive in the labour market. In this pre-enrolment phase it appears that candidates are drawn by the local reputation of the origin institutions and evaluate each offering against their own specific needs. This need to obtain a qualification can be seen in the following comments:

- *We have a desire to study overseas and get international experience... it is a chance to learn about different cultures (Graduate MJ)*
- *It is important to get the degree paper ... then we maybe can get a more chance to keep our job if we get the paper. We feel more safe in our job as we can keep the standard if we pass the course (Graduate CM)*

When asked why the graduates chose to undertake this particular program (apart from the need to get a qualification), the issue of reputation was often cited as being a contributing factor. The comments appear to indicate that students' satisfaction in the pre-enrolment phase is strongly influenced by having enough information to evaluate firstly the academic requirements of the program and then subsequently the reputation of the provider.

## **5.2. Phase 2: Academic experiences**

Building from the expectations of the students in the pre-enrolment stage, the students develop new levels of satisfaction based on the value they perceive they have obtained from the courses in their program and the level of transfer of their learning to skills practice. The following comments highlight this idea:

- *The thinking is different between what we think will happen and what we experienced. Because this has more analysis ... now we can use the theory now ... so I can have more deep thinking now (Graduate TW)*
- *Sometimes at work we have to work in teams with people from different cultures. This we have also learned at school. For example I have learned that lets say that when we work with Europeans they are much more relaxed ... but when we work with Americans they much like the power (Graduate MJ)*

In this particular regard, the level of satisfaction experienced by the students is directly related to the level of value they place on the courses and content of the academic program. That is, the value obtained from undertaking the courses is indicative of students' satisfaction with value received from the educational experience.

## **5.3. Phase 3: Connection Experiences**

The collaboration between the university and local partner appears to be essential for reassuring students of the sense of belonging and fulfilling their need for responsiveness to their concerns. Communication becomes critical to guarantee both a coordinated and integrated approach to the delivery, teaching and management of programs between the delivery partners. Conversely, the lack of such an approach has a negative impact on student satisfaction levels. The following comments highlight this well:

- *It is difficult because there is no link between the partner and university and us as students. We find it difficult to identify with the university as we want to study with an Australian university but when we do that we are at the partner institution (Graduate TH)*
- *We don't feel part of the university or the partner so we don't really feel connected. That makes it difficult if we have a problem or query. The partner does not want to help and makes us as students contact professor in Australia. But we only have met them for one week and don't feel comfortable doing that (Graduate CL)*

Thus, in the transnational context, the experience felt in the connection experience phase is found to be influenced by the collaborative relationship between the partner institutions.

## **5.4. Phase 4: Post degree experiences**

Graduates involved in the focus groups had only recently graduated and as such had few comments around post degree satisfaction. International reputation is seen as significant to adding value to the satisfaction experience; however, due to the newness of their recent post-degree experience, this has yet to be proven. While those involved in the study were satisfied with the academic outcomes of their learning

experiences they had difficulty in feeling connected to the Australian university in this phase of their encounter experience, leading to mixed feelings as to their satisfaction.

- *It is good that the university offers the same program here as in Australia, but the delivery needs to be better coordinated (CL)*

Such ambivalent responses nonetheless are indicative of the value placed on the global reputation of their education.

## 6. Implications and Conclusions

The importance of identifying factors that indicate satisfaction is clear for any service providers, including providers of transnational education. The sustainability of the ‘business’ relies on satisfied customers, who engage in return or extended business or promote the business to other potential customers. Transnational education has the potential to develop rich synergies for educational institutions through the development of a strong base of satisfied students. Transnational graduates who are highly satisfied with the outcomes of their overall educational experience could potentially promote and add to the reputation of the origin institution. This can further enhance both teaching and research opportunities for the institution and to attract international enrolments. Satisfied transnational students could also contribute to the local reputation of the institution and help to stimulate further demand for educational products offered.

As discussed in the findings, for these focus groups of transnational students, the study reveals that satisfaction is derived from the following factors:

- Local perceptions of reputation
- Value of courses
- Transfer of learning to skills practice
- Communication
- Collaboration between partners
- Integration of processes
- Sense of belonging
- Global reputation.

Furthermore, the findings and analysis indicate that student satisfaction is not limited to the academic experience. Indeed, satisfaction extends over other phases of students’ encounter with the institution; each phase connected to different factors that trigger satisfaction. These factors could be considered as indicators of student satisfaction. By mapping these factors onto the diagram showing the phases of student encounter cycle, a model is developed; as shown in Figure 1.

The significance of this model is that it makes explicit the factors that are present in different student encounter phases which give rise to satisfaction (or conversely, if absent, dissatisfaction). For transnational education providers, this model identifies and suggests opportunities that could be leveraged in order to raise student satisfaction levels. Focusing on the academic experience alone - as is the current prevalence of student satisfaction assessment - limits the greater satisfaction outcome that could be achieved.

Notwithstanding the value of this model, it must be acknowledged that there are limitations, in that it has been developed from the results of a small, preliminary study into student satisfaction. The lists of identified factors indicative of satisfaction are therefore neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. This however, has opened an opportunity to further research that is currently being undertaken, in order to verify these factors and others that may exist to further improve the model. Nevertheless, as it stands, the model exists as a clear framework against which such further research might be carried out.

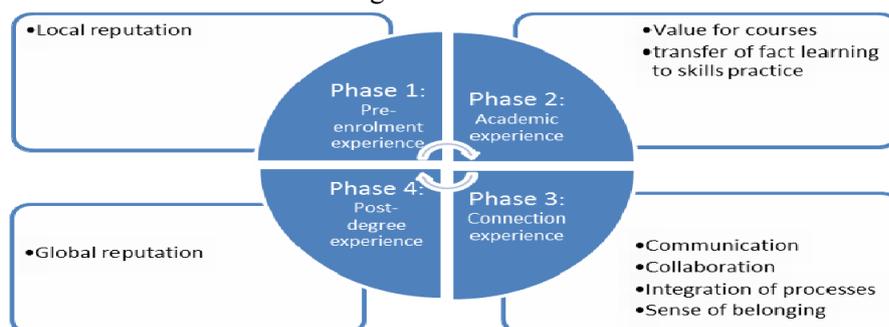


Fig 1: satisfaction indicators over phases of the student’s encounter with the educational institution.

Additionally, further research could usefully be undertaken to ascertain the degree to which each of the satisfaction factors proportionally contribute to students' overall satisfaction; that is, to ascertain which are the key determinants of satisfaction. Such research could provide insights to transnational education providers as to where they might direct resources to efficaciously enhance student satisfaction.

In conclusion, this paper began with the recognition that transnational education was an important area of strategic growth for many universities. It then examined the literature that informed the notion of student satisfaction and sought to explore this further by gathering the views of a group of recently graduated transnational students. Acknowledgement was given to the findings of Gibson (2010) that suggest that whilst academic experience was a key factor of student satisfaction, other factors exist which should not be ignored. This understanding was then used to develop a framework to identify student satisfaction across the full cycle of the phases of students' encounter with the education institution. The results of this study did indeed reveal other satisfaction factors associated with the different phases of the students' encounter experience. A second stage of this research is currently being undertaken to validate the model presented above. We anticipate that the overall validation of the model should offer practitioners and researchers respectively, who have interests in the field of student satisfaction, ways in which their endeavours might usefully be enhanced.

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